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SEEKING THE MOKÈLÉ-MBÈMBÉ

In the first of a three part series, Dr Karl Shuker investigates as to whether there could be unidentified reptilian survivors from the age of the dinosaurs still surviving in parts of Africa.

For many years, the most famous cryptozoological creatures – those which may exist but which have yet to be formally recognised by science – were the Loch Ness monster, the yeti, a sundry array of sea serpents, and the North American bigfoot or sasquatch. This situation changed dramatically, however, in 1982.

Focus on the Congo

Following his return to the USA in the December of the previous year, after the second of two expeditions to the People's Republic of the Congo (formerly the French Congo), veteran American cryptozoologist Prof. Roy P. Mackal made an astounding

announcement. He revealed to an amazed media and general public that the elusive swamp monster he had been searching for in that region of Africa could conceivably, in his opinion, turn out to be a living dinosaur!

A new cryptozoological star had been born – an elusive long-necked

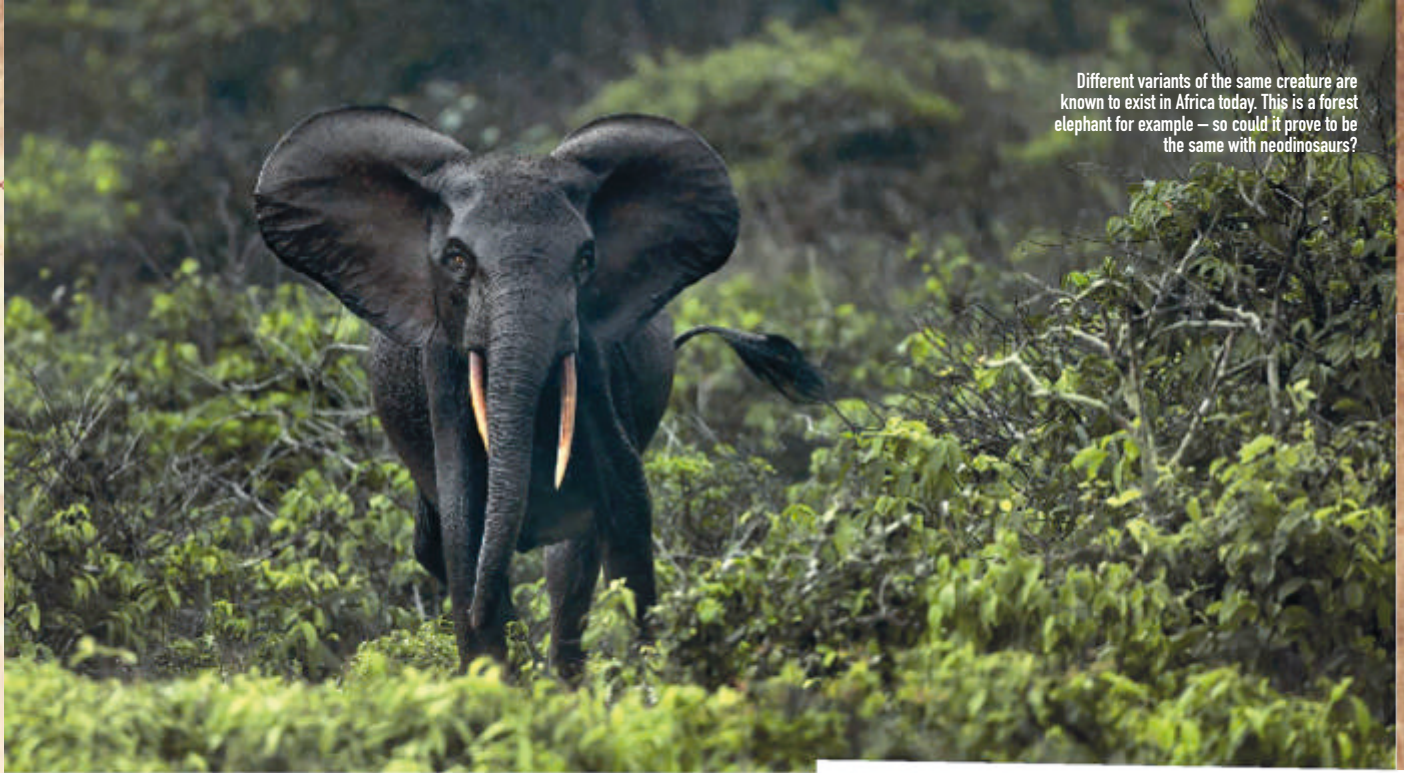
mystery beast that bore an extraordinary outward resemblance to a sauropod (*Diplodocus*-like) dinosaur and was known to the local Congolese pygmies as the *mokèlè-mbèmbé*. Since then, numerous expeditions in search of this and other potential prehistoric reptilian survivors from the age of the

➤ Judging from eyewitness descriptions, there is a great similarity in appearance between the *mokèlè-mbèmbé*, seen here alongside hippos, and certain dinosaurs.

Artwork courtesy William Rebsamen.



Different variants of the same creature are known to exist in Africa today. This is a forest elephant for example – so could it prove to be the same with neodinosauurs?



dinosaur have been launched in various parts of tropical Africa. These have uncovered all manner of fascinating and tantalising crypto-clues, as will be revealed in this series of articles.

A number of neodinosauurs?

Judging from eyewitness accounts, there are a number of very different mystery beasts on file that seem to resemble various familiar types of dinosaur known currently just from the fossil record. Whether any actually are dinosaurs, of course – thereby sensationally resurrecting prehistory's most spectacular reptilian lineages from at least 64 million years of official extinction - has yet to be determined.

Nevertheless, because they are so commonly aligned with them in the cryptozoological literature, the term

'neodinosaur' is often given to these dinosaurian lookalikes. And the most famous of all neodinosauurs is still the mokélé-mbèmbé.

Earliest accounts

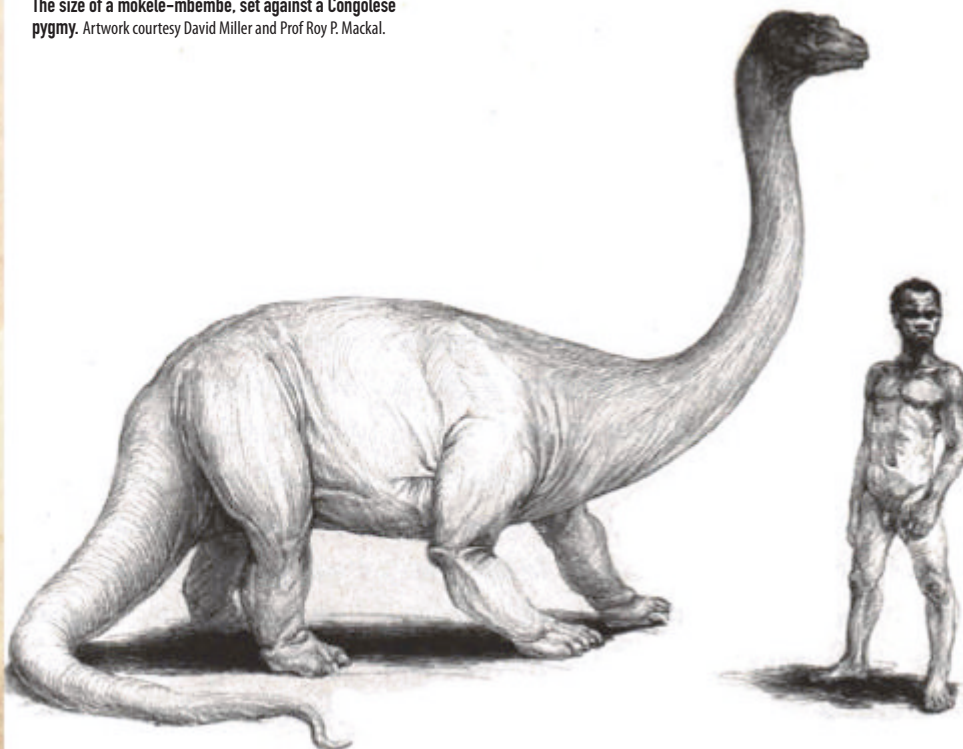
This mysterious creature has a surprisingly lengthy history. Vague, unspecific reports of giant water dragons in parts of western and central Africa date back at least as far as 1776. The earliest documented report is of a series of monstrous three-clawed footprints, roughly 1m (3ft) in diameter, which were observed in the Gabon-Congo area by a French missionary called Abbé Lievain Bonaventure Proyard.

It was in 1913, however, that the mokélé-mbèmbé (which literally translates as 'blocker of rivers') was specifically mentioned for the first



▲ Modern interest in African neodinosauurs dates back to a crocodile study that took place during the mid-1970s in Gabon.

The size of a mokélé-mbèmbé, set against a Congolese pygmy. Artwork courtesy David Miller and Prof Roy P. Mackal.



time, by name, in an official German government report by a Captain Freiherr von Stein zu Lausnitz. This featured as part of the written documentary record of the Likouala-Congo expedition of that year, in which he had participated. The captain noted the information obtained from the Congolese pygmies revealing that the mokélé-mbèmbé is: ".... said to be of a brownish-grey colour with a smooth skin, its size approximately that of an elephant, at least that of a hippopotamus. It is said to have a long and very flexible neck... A few spoke about a long muscular tail like that of an alligator. Canoes coming near it are said to be doomed; the animal is said to attack vessels and to kill the crews but without eating the bodies."

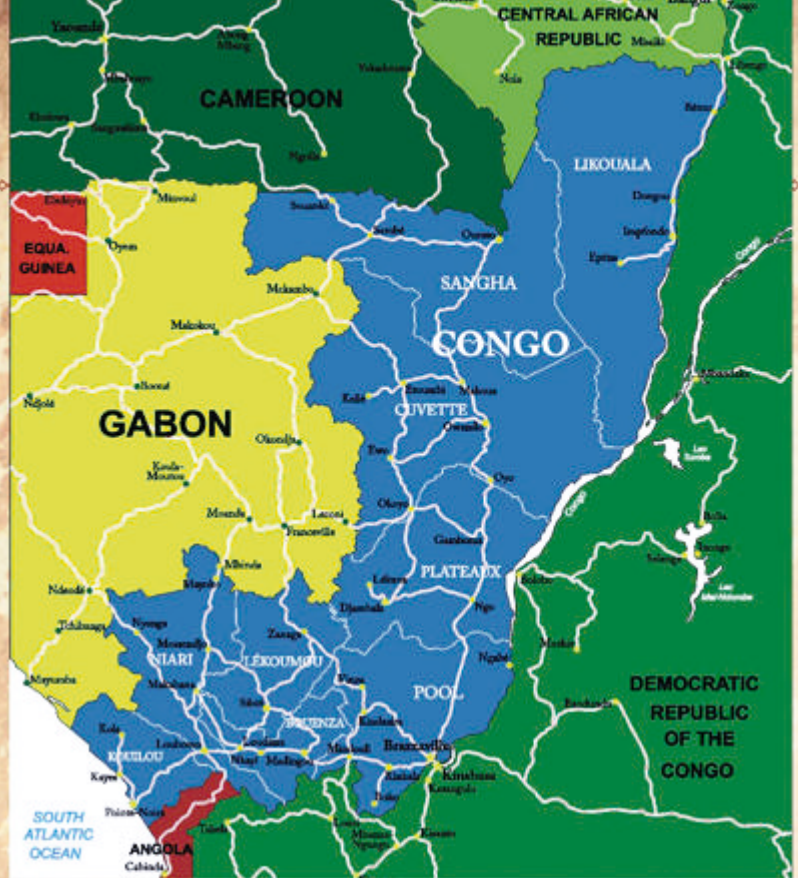
Nevertheless, this intriguing report attracted little attention until many years later. Even in his pioneering cryptozoological tome entitled *On the Track of Unknown Animals* (1958), Dr Bernard Heuvelmans did not accord

➤ Mackal and Powell headed to Likouala, a remote region in the northeast of the People's Republic of the Congo.

A precedent for the mokélé-mbèmbé?

At the start of the 20th century, it was confirmed that what is now known to be a member of the giraffe family had remained hidden in the Ituri forest of the Congo, away from European eyes, although its existence was common knowledge to the pygmies who share its habitat.

This mysterious beast was formally named as the okapi (*Okapia johnstoni*) in 1901. On this basis, might it not be possible that a large, essentially aquatic water creature could also exist in this part of the world, presently unrecognised by science, in the guise of the mokélé-mbèmbé?



Obtaining answers

When Powell then showed the tribespeople a selection of pictures of living and extinct animals, the image that they consistently chose as representing the closest match with the n'yamala was that of a *Diplodocus* dinosaur. Moreover, testing their honesty as to which creatures lived in their region, Powell deliberately showed them, amid pictures of known local beasts (which they readily recognised), some images of bears and camels,

which definitely do not exist in or around Gabon.

Sure enough, the Fang people stated that they had never seen these alien animals, and that they did not live in the area. This confirmation of their truthfulness concerning those that did exist locally gave Powell confidence in accepting their testimony concerning the n'yamala.

Expeditions launched

His conversations with the Fang tribe led to Powell teaming up with Prof.

the mokélé-mbèmbé any greater coverage or significance than a host of other tropical African water monsters with strange names also documented by him in what has become one of the classic cryptozoological books.

Growing interest

In fact, it was not until the mid-1970s that this mystifying swamp-dweller finally begins to emerge from the shadows of cryptozoological obscurity. This was thanks to an expedition not to the Congo but rather to neighbouring Gabon, by American herpetologist James Powell.

While visiting this country in 1976 and 1979 to study crocodiles, Powell was very surprised to learn from the local Fang Bantu tribe of a huge water beast fervently believed in by them, which they termed the n'yamala. Asked by Powell to describe it, they proffered a verbal portrait corresponding precisely with that of the Congolese mokélé-mbèmbé.

➤ Left-right: James Powell, with a camp guide and Prof Roy Mackal in search of the mokélé-mbèmbé. Photo courtesy Prof Roy Mackal.





▲ The mokélé-mbembé is said to be three-toed.

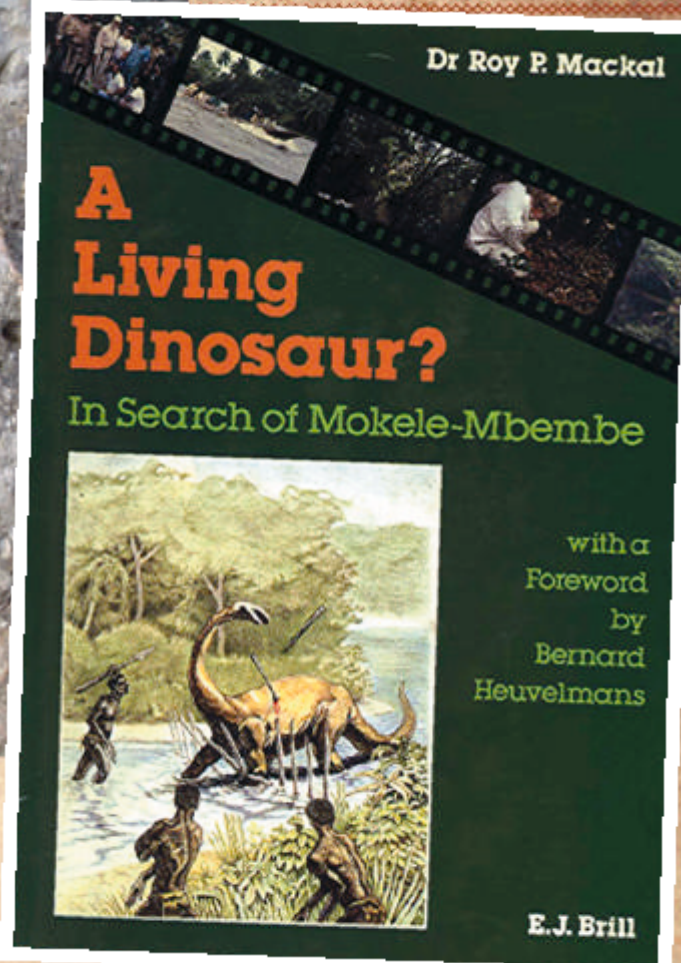
Roy P. Mackal, not yet retired from his academic position as a zoologist and biochemist at Chicago University in the USA. Together, in 1980, they duly launched the first of two expeditions led by Mackal to the vast Likouala swamplands in the scarcely explored northern region of the People's Republic of the Congo.

Here they hoped to discover the n'yamala's Congolese counterpart, in the guise of the mokélé-mbembé. A year later, Mackal returned there with a second expedition, and the data gathered during these searches, which Mackal described in detail in his fascinating book entitled *A Living Dinosaur? In Search of Mokélé-mbembé*, published in 1987, laid the groundwork for all future African neodinosaur quests.

New information

Although he and his colleagues never saw a mokélé-mbembé themselves, Mackal's information based on reports of this cryptid creature, as elicited from the local Likouala people and Kabonga pygmies, was very extensive. They not only fully collaborated but also considerably expanded upon the information that had been contained in the 1913 German government report.

Asking eyewitnesses to describe the mokélé-mbembé verbally and via drawings in the sand *before* showing them any images of creatures (thereby avoiding any chance of influencing their accounts), Mackal and his colleagues determined that this mystery beast does indeed



▲ Prof Roy Mackal's book describing his expeditions to the Congo in search of the mokélé-mbembé generated a lot of interest.

▼ The mokélé-mbembé is said to spend the majority of its time submerged and out of sight, but it does feed on plant matter along the banks of the waters where it occurs.

Artwork courtesy David Miller and Prof Roy Mackal.

closely resemble a small (i.e. elephant-sized) sauropod dinosaur.

Determining its appearance

It is described as having a basic *Apatosaurus* (*Brontosaurus*) or *Diplodocus* shape. This means that it is characterised by a long neck, small head, four sturdy limbs and clawed feet that leave behind characteristic three-toed footprints (examples of which were witnessed and recorded by Mackal's team), with a long tapering tail.

It spends much of its time submerged in deep riverside pools and small lakes, with only its head and neck spasmodically emerging above the water surface to browse upon the bankside vegetation. However, it is occasionally seen on land, mostly during the early morning or late afternoon.

One notable eyewitness account collected by the team was that of a local hunter called Nicolas Mondongo. The encounter happened on one sunny morning during the 1960s, while he was standing on the bank of the Likouala-aux-Herbes River upstream of Mokengi village.

Mondongo observed a mokélé-mbembé rise up fully out of the water, which cascaded down from its shoulders as it stood there for a full three minutes, totally exposed and little more than 14m (46ft) away from



the terrified Mondonga, before it abruptly submerged again. Mondonga estimated its total length to have been roughly 9m (30ft).

Feeding preferences

The mokélé-mbèmbé is exclusively vegetarian, and exhibits a pronounced dietary preference for an indigenous fruit known to local people as the *malombo*, which proved to be from a species of *Landolphia* gourd. Nevertheless, in common with certain other large vegetarian species, such as elephants and Cape buffaloes, its size and strength means that it can be very aggressive if confronted - overturning canoes, killing (but not eating) the vessels' defenceless occupants with powerful thrashes of its tail, and even invading the pygmies' camps.

In addition to being greatly feared, people living in the area consider the mokélé-mbèmbé to be as real as any other animal species inhabiting this region. Indeed, they were surprised that the Western explorers were not familiar with it.

A mokélé-mbèmbé captured

One of the most extraordinary claims made by locals interviewed by Mackal's team came from a tribe of pygmies who live near a large shallow Likouala lake called Tele, where mokélé-mbèmbés are often said to appear. Back in 1959, according to these pygmies, they had actually captured and killed a mokélé-mbèmbé there.

They stated that they had cordoned off part of the lake for fishing, by

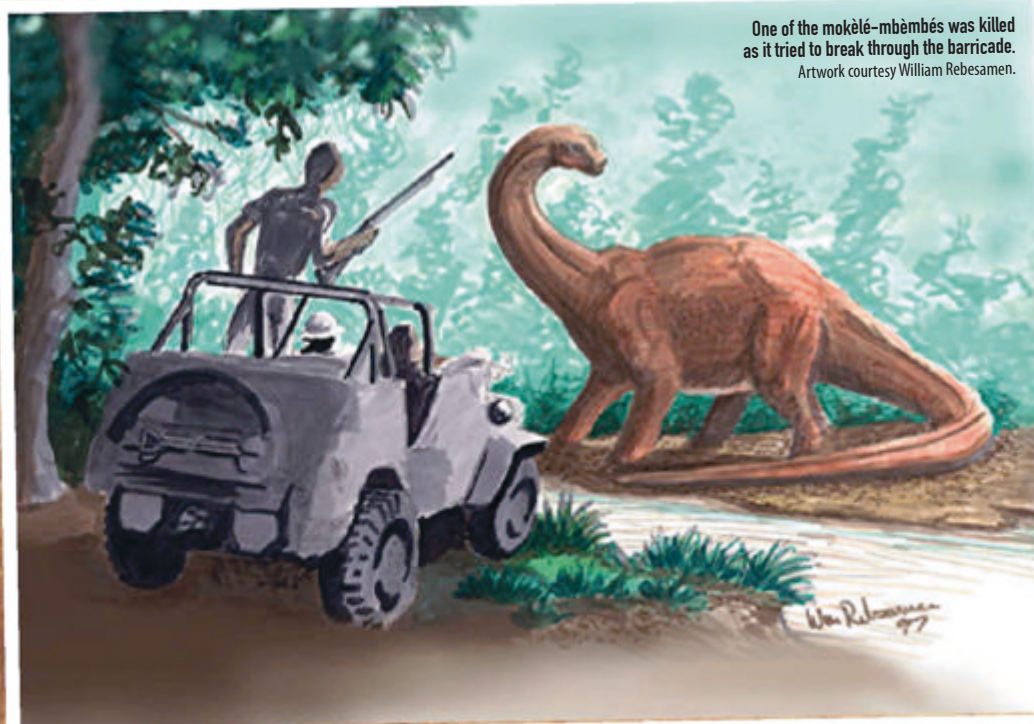
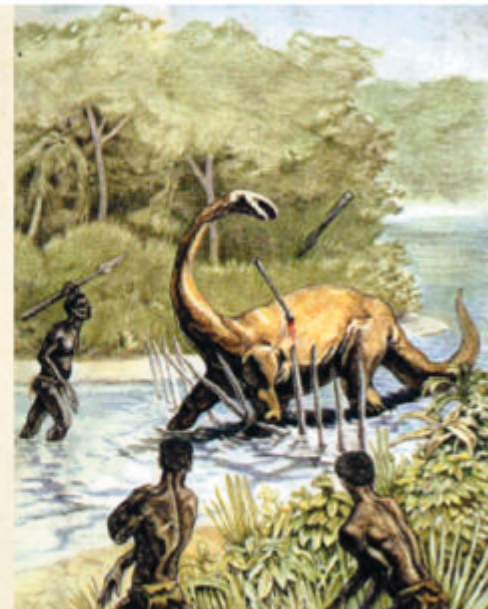
building and erecting a high wooden barricade, specifically to deter mokélé-mbèmbés. However, two mokélé-mbèmbés attempted to force their way through the barricade, which resulted in the pygmies spearing one of these creatures to death.

Afterwards, some of them feasted upon its flesh, but everyone who ate it died shortly afterwards. Not surprisingly, therefore, those that had not partaken of the meat and had thus survived wasted no time in discarding what was left of the creature's carcass. This was also a tragedy for modern science, however, because it deprived any scientist of a unique opportunity to examine the physical remains from one of these creatures that might otherwise have

➤ Although the mokélé-mbèmbé was killed, its flesh proved deadly when eaten, and its body was discarded. Artwork courtesy Prof Roy Mackal.



The mokélé-mbèmbé is considered very dangerous in the locality where it occurs. Artwork courtesy Richard Svensson.



One of the mokélé-mbèmbés was killed as it tried to break through the barricade. Artwork courtesy William Rebesamen.

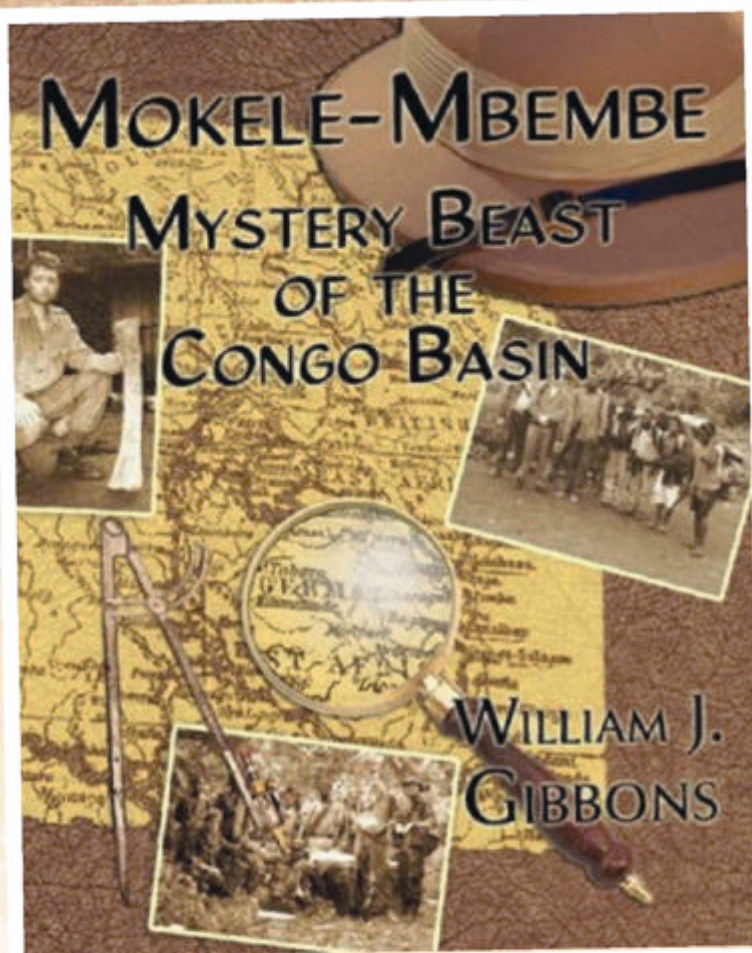
been retained.

British-led expeditions

Inevitably, once news of Mackal's findings was publicised, a veritable phalanx of mokélé-mbèmbé expeditions travelled to the Congo in search of this enigmatic neodinosaur, calling to mind scenes from the film *Jurassic Park*. British scientific endeavour was well-represented by two Operation Congo expeditions, both led by Scottish-born explorer Bill Gibbons.

These took place in 1986 and 1992 respectively. Sadly, the team was beset by bureaucratic problems, which severely hampered its attempts to pursue its long-necked quarry in the area of Likouala. Once again on both occasions, however, the group nevertheless collected a sizeable archive of reports and eyewitness accounts.

Close to the village of Dzeke, moreover, team members were taken by a retired elephant hunter called



▲ Expeditions by those such as Bill Gibbons have added to the recorded information about mokèlé-mbèmbé, but tangible evidence of the creature's existence has remained elusive.
Artwork course William Rebsamen.

◀ Bill Gibbons has written about his quest to find the mokèlé-mbèmbé.

the lake, with only their trunks curved up above the water surface!

A much larger British expedition of ten people, organised by children's television presenter Tommy Boyd and led by explorer Barry Marshall, took place during February 1993. They hoped to find some evidence for Cameroon's supposed counterpart to the mokèlé-mbèmbé. However, no evidence for its existence or even any positive responses from native tribes there were reported on this occasion.

Emmanuel Mougoumela to a wooded area near the river. Here they saw the trail of alleged mokèlé-mbèmbé footprints first documented several years earlier by Mackal and company during their second expedition.

Of particular note is the fact that Gibbons collected considerable first-hand information and sightings from various French missionaries who had spent many years in this region, and for whom the mokèlé-mbèmbé was an absolute reality. In short, testimony for its existence extended beyond that of native sources, to include Western-born eyewitnesses too.

Further investigations

Prof Mackal was never able to raise sufficient money for a third expedition to the area. Nevertheless, other

well-publicised, post-Mackal expeditions have included two Japanese expeditions during the 1980s, although neither made any notable findings. Then there was a solo quest to Lake Tele in 1986 by American journalist Rory Nugent. He snapped some blurry photos of an unidentifiable periscope-like object visible above the lake surface, but ultimately, these were inconclusive.

A two-man expedition to this same lake took place over the course of four months in 1989, headed by British traveller-writer Redmond O'Hanlon. He concluded that mokèlé-mbèmbé reports were based upon submerged elephants crossing



▲ A Baka tribesperson's drawing, purporting to show the appearance of the li'lèla-bembe, obtained in 2009.
Photo courtesy Robert Mullin.

Into the new millennium

Expeditions have continued during the present century. There was the Dino2000 expedition to Lake Tele in November 2000. It featured the British explorer Adam Davies, and although he obtained plenty of video footage, there were no sightings of mokèlé-mbèmbé.

Also in November 2000, Bill Gibbons returned to Africa, in the company of American businessman David Woetzel. They journeyed to Cameroon, where they penetrated the hitherto-unexplored forest and swamps along the Boumba and Laponji Rivers.



The suggestion that reports of the mokèlé-mbèmbé are actually based on swimming elephants seems unlikely, although this explanation has been suggested.

In this region, they gathered numerous accounts from the Baka pygmies concerning their mokèlé-mbèmbé, which is known as the li'kela-bembe. During the following year, Gibbons returned to Cameroon, as part of the CryptoSafari expedition featuring fellow cryptozoological researchers Scott Norman and John Kirk, and added further details to their neodinosaur dossier, but definitive evidence of the existence of such creatures remained elusive.

Sonar evidence?

In 2006, a National Geographic expedition led by Brady Barr trekked out to Lake Tele, but no mokèlé-mbèmbé sightings were recorded. In 2009, Bill Gibbons revisited Cameroon with a fresh team, as part of the cryptozoology-based television series *Monster Quest*, but again, no sightings occurred. However, they did obtain sonar readings of very long, unidentified serpentine shapes underwater.

During 2011, another cryptozoological television series, *Beast Hunter*, sent an expedition to the Congo Basin. Unfortunately, no findings of significance were made on this occasion either, but there is, largely thanks to the earlier expeditions of Prof Roy Mackal, a wealth of evidence surrounding the likely appearance and lifestyle of the mokèlé-mbèmbé, obtained from a wide variety of different sources.



▲ The mokèlé-mbèmbé is reputedly primarily aquatic, which could explain the sonar readings. It is said to use its long neck to browse on fruit and vegetation. Artwork courtesy William Rebsamen.

Fact and fiction

The problem is in part that these creatures, assuming they do exist, live in a very inaccessible area of the world. The terrain itself is hostile, and this makes moving around very difficult. Furthermore, the mokèlé-mbèmbé is essentially aquatic by nature, and reputedly rare as well, which makes it exceedingly hard to spot, without being very lucky.

Nevertheless, cryptozoologists are undeterred, and the search continues. Even Hollywood has shown an interest in the mokèlé-mbèmbé, resulting in

the 1985 Touchstone film *Baby: Secret of the Lost Legend*. This concerned the discovery and temporary capture of a baby mokèlé-mbèmbé by an American palaeontologist. There can be no greater recognition afforded to this modern addition to the list of cryptozoological creatures that have captured the public's interest than being immortalised in a movie!

* Dr Karl Shuker BSc PhD FRES FZS is a zoologist, author and broadcaster who is pre-eminent in the field of cryptozoology – the study of animals whose existence is not proven.

Next month: Assuming that the mokèlé-mbèmbé is real (and not merely a native legend), what could it be? Several very different identities have been put forward, as will be revealed next month in the second part of this article.

Discover more about such mysteries

Karl's book, entitled *Dragons in Zoology, Cryptozoology, and Culture*, is published by Coachwhip Publications (978-1616462154), and extends to 220 pages. It can be purchased from bookshops or online, and is priced at approximately £20.



▲ Travelling through the area of Africa where the mokèlé-mbèmbé is said to occur is very difficult. There are no short cuts through dense tropical forest!

